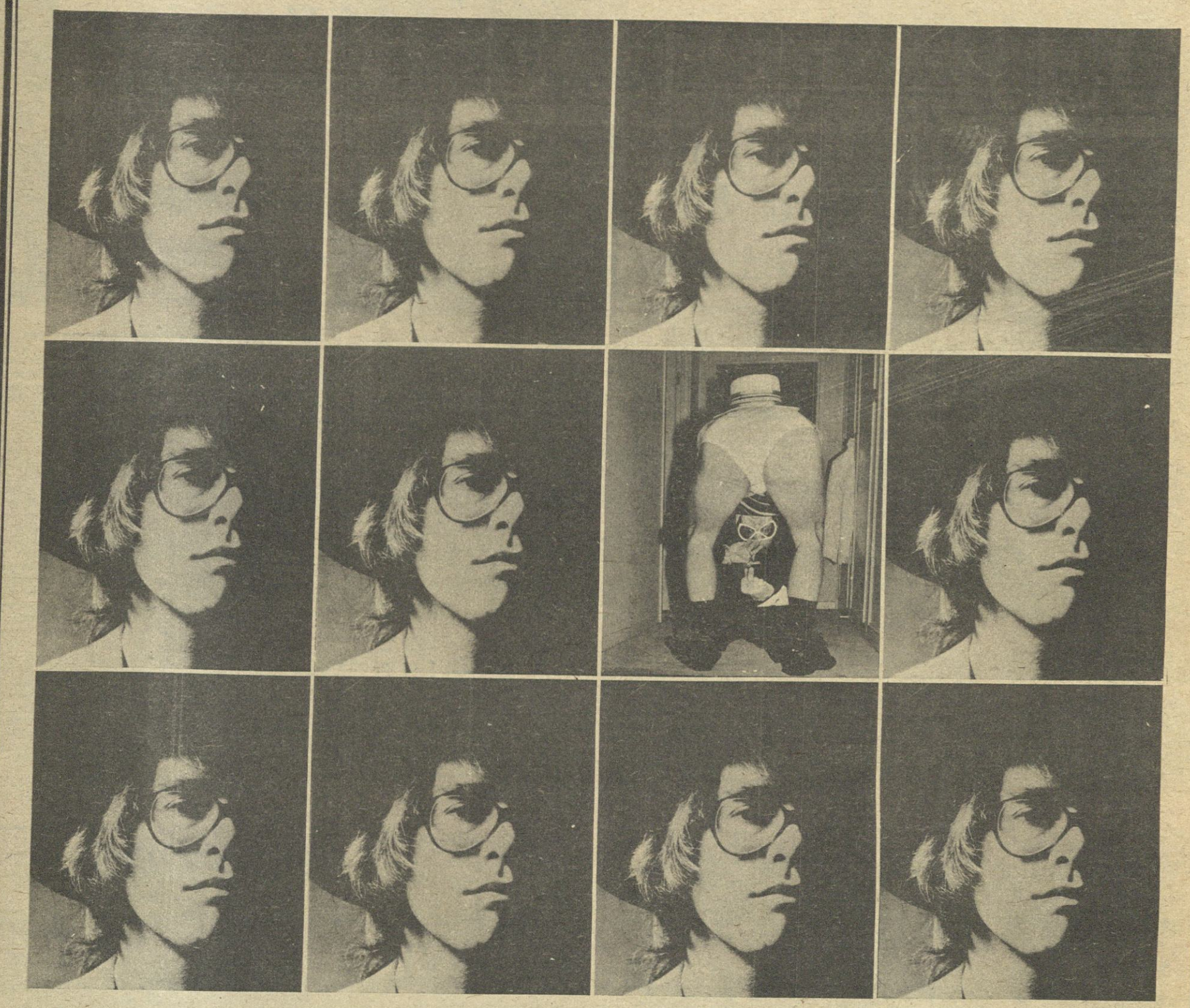


THE LIFE AND TIMES OF ELTON JOHN

By ROY CARR and CHARLES SHAAR MURRAY Part one: how the sand kicked in his face turned to gold-dust after all

NME: Let's begin at the beginning. When did you first face an audience?

EJ: That must have been in 1964, when I was just 16. I sang and played piano in the public bar of the Northwood Hills Hotel every Friday, Saturday and Sunday for a whole year. And, during that whole period, I don't think that I ever missed a gig. I used to sing Jim Reeves songs, Cliff Richard songs, anything that was popular — and also play things like "Roll Out The Barrel", Cockney songs, "When Irish Eyes Are Smiling" . . . you had to play "When Irish Eyes Are Smiling" otherwise you'd get a pint of beer slung over you. Al Jolson songs were also very popular. But meanwhile, I was still in Bluesology. We were semi-pro and used to rehearse in the Hotel.

How much did you get paid for playing in the bar?

A pound a night, but I used to have a box which used to be passed around at the end of the evening. When I first started my residency, nobody used to go into the public bar but eventually people started to come in and, after a while, it was packed out every weekend. With the money people used to put in my box I was earning about £25 a week, which was great when you consider that I was still at school at the time.

Did you have a bass player and drummer?

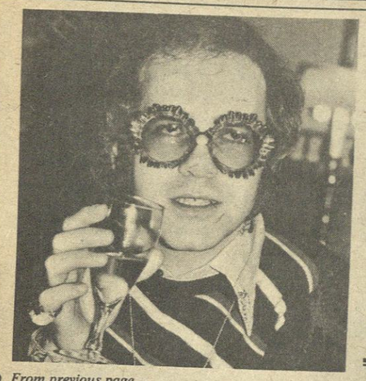
No, just me. I had to play on an old upright piano that was out-of-tune, and I sang through a little amplifier. there were a couple of times when I had to dive out of the window when really bad fights broke out. After a while, I really grew to hate it . . . . first of all I was nervous and, secondly, I started to play rock 'n' roll. Actually, I only took on the gig so I could save up to buy a Hohner electric piano and an amp. Once I'd done that, I left the pub, because Bluesology were beginning to get more and more dates.

What kind of gigs were Bluesology playing?

South Harrow British Legion. In all ways, we used to be a very snobbish group. We were always one step behind everybody else; we played Jimmy Witherspoon numbers like "Times Are Getting Tougher Than Tough" and "When The Lights Go Out". Our lead singer Stuart Brown was Jimmy Witherspoon crazy, so that's what we used to play. I can remember playing the South Harrow British Legion Hall when all these rockers rode right into the place on their motorbikes and said that if we didn't play rock 'n' roll they'd smash our gear up. I was into that, because at the time all I really wanted to do was play like Jerry Lee Lewis or Little Richard.

Bluesology also had a brass section, which in those days was quite ridiculous. Those were the days of Georgie Fame, Zoot Money and the Flamingo Club scene but, instead of playing the kind of things they were playing, we'd try to find really obscure tracks on obscure albums. I can remember a couple of albums that came out on Oriole and Sue . . . Willie Mabon's "Gotta Get Some . . . we used to try and be very clever and be one-up on other bands. We used to do a thing called "Pain - Gets A Little

■ *Continues over page*



The Cavern was one of the worst places for nicked gear

Marsha was terrible but Baldry hired her anyway

Cabaret is a graveyard... all those clanking knives

● *From previous page*

Deeper" which nobody had ever heard — so consequently we used to die a death everywhere we played.

Didn't you ever play alongside the big soul/blues orientated bands of the day?

When we turned professional, we did an audition for Roy Tempest at the Gaumont State, Kilburn and he said "Yes". I'd left school by this time and I was working at Mills Music where I had been for a year.

Mills Music?

Making the tea.

***Good* tea?**

Yeah! And I used to take all the parcels to the post office, which was a mile away. I'd work in the packing department wrapping up the parcels and take them on a wheelbarrow to the post office in Kingsway near the Oasis swimming pool. Also, I used to take messages to Joe Loss, and I used to get really excited about that.

Looking back on those days, I had a thoroughly good time working there. They were nice people and we always used to have a laugh. Anyway, as I was saying; after I left Mills Music, Roy Tempest offered us a job backing Wilson Pickett. . .and we rehearsed . . . and he said we were lousy and went back to America. As you can imagine, we were really disappointed. But that didn't last very long because we got a tour backing Major Lance and that's the point when we all decided to turn professional. From then on, we used to back visiting American acts like Patti LaBelle & Her Bluebelles . . . .

What was it like to back LaBelle?

Hard. I mean, to begin with, we weren't the very best of bands. At that time, LaBelle were doing slow things like "Over The Rainbow" and "Danny Boy" which was completely the wrong kind of material for them to be doing around the clubs. The things that they went down best with were "I Sold My Heart To The Junkman" and "A Groovy Kind Of Love" and "All Or Nothing".

You once said that, of all the artists that you ever backed with Bluesology, the late Billy Stewart was the finest to work with . . .

He really was the greatest. Let's face it, we were just an average backing group and if you interview Pattie LaBelle now, she'll admit that when she first came over, Bluesology weren't the best backing group around. And she'd be correct! But Billy Stewart got us together so well. He was absolutely brilliant on stage . . . incredible. His timeing, showmanship and voice were just great. When we played the Ricky Tick Club at Windsor, Georgie Fame had a hit record with Billy's "Sittin' In The Park" and when Billy started singing it half-way through his act, some mod in the audience kept on yelling out, "GEORGIE FAME . . . GEORGIE FAME" and Billy — who was a really huge guy —suddenly leapt off the stage and chased this guy right out of the club. That's the sorta guy Billy Stewart was, the kinda guy who would travel up the M1 and when we stopped would take a leak for about 12 minutes. We'd all sit in the car waiting for him to finish . . .

Sounds like a mate of Bill Wyman's . . .

That guy was fantastic and by far the most professional artist that I've ever had the pleasure of working with.

As a pianist, did you learn anything from Stewart?

No, but what I did learn was . . . Billy Stewart had tremendous powers of leadership. He alone made us play twice as good as we should have been able to, not by saying "You've gotta play this and that," but by the way he actually performed. He was a born leader on stage and what was very important, he always enjoyed himself even though he got turned over something rotten. Some of the tales I could tell you about some of those poor acts we worked with . . .

Roy Tempest, who used to bring these American soul acts to Europe had this four-bedroomed flat in Chelsea. It wasn't the most luxurious of flats, but he used to have the Orlons staying there, Billy Stewart, Clarence "Frogman" Henry and Roy C, and he used to charge them all fifty quid a week for staying there, so he used to be making a fortune on the flat — let alone the actual gigs. I mean, we did four gigs in one day with Billy Stewart. We did the US Serviceman's Club at Douglas House, Lancaster Gate at around four in the afternoon, then we did The Ritz and The Plaza Ballrooms in Birmingham and then we finished off by playing the Cue Club in Paddington at around six in the morning. If playing four gigs wasn't bad enough, we had to load up, unload and set up our own equipment at each gig.

I mean, Tempest's doubles were amazing, and how we ever kept to those schedules I still don't know. We'd play Nottingham Cellar Club and the Sheffield Mojo in the same evening and the road between Nottingham and Sheffield was a joke. Sometimes, we'd have to go through to the Twisted Wheel Manchester as well. But at that time, The Twisted Wheel and The Mojo were the best clubs in England.

Anyway, Tempest eventually got exposed in the Sunday papers for bringing over all these phoney American acts . . . I even remember James Brown Jr, the Original Supremes and we even backed the Original Drifters a couple of times. The one group that I really felt sorry for was The Ink Spots because the kids thought they were going to be something like The Drifters. When we played The Ritz and The Plaza in Birmingham they used to hire three people to clap at the front and get the crowd going. It was full when they came on stage and empty by the time they'd finished. Which was a shame because they really were lovely people. They used to start their act with "Back In Your Own Yard" finish off with "When The Saints Go Marchin' In" and also do things like "Whispering Grass."

But even then, the kids at The Twisted Wheel were so hip that the kids came along with The Ink Spots original 78, which they'd dug out of the attic and carried them off shoulder high. The Wheel and the Mojo were the hippest places around.

If you clicked with the crowd the first time you appeared at either of these clubs then your reputation was made in the North and the Midlands. But then there were other great clubs in Manchester . . . the Oasis and . . . I remember playing at the Jigsaw and the bill was Alex Harvey at the bottom, then Sugar Pie DeSanto — and then there was us backing some American acts whose name I can't remember. It was funny, because a local band could build up a huge reputation. The Action were one of the biggest attractions in the South, but meant fuck all up North. Likewise The Undertakers were monsters in the North, while nobody had heard of them around London.

We played The Cavern Club in Liverpool twice and it was definitely one of the worst places for getting your gear nicked, so bad that we had to keep someone posted all the time. And the overflow from the men's toilet was so disgusting . . . but it was still a great place to play. I look back on those days and they were so enjoyable. I can't ever remember being miserable or underfed. I know that I used to live at home and didn't have to pay any rent, but even so, on £15 a week, I don't know how I managed to survive.

Those must have been hard tours. Didn't you have to double at week-ends?

Oh yeah, I remember doing nine or ten gigs a week. We used to get £15 each a week, and out of that we had to pay all our own expenses: hotel, petrol, HP payments and repairs, but yet we still managed to survive somehow. We never starved because, in those days, you could get good bed & breakfast for five bob or 7/6 in places like Newcastle and Manchester. The only real drag was having to carry your own equipment because we didn't have any roadies . . . and those times when the van used to break down (sigh). Those were the only hang-ups so, apart from that, I was always very happy.

What was your reaction when roadies were invented?

The first time I had a roadie — when I became Elton John — I just could not believe it, because I used to have the most equipment in Bluesology: a Vox Continental and a Vox AC 30 amplifier which I had for five years. During that time, I only had to get it repaired a couple of times. It's funny, the first day I got my Vox we played the Scotch of St. James Club and one of the notes stuck and I was so embarrassed. However, Eric Burdon came up to me and said, "Don't worry, son, it happened to us on one occasion," which I thought was very nice of him at the time.

Did you feel that you were actually making some headway as a musician?

I felt very excited. I used to go down to places like the Scotch of St. James and see people like Gene Pitney and the Beatles and be very impressed. We really did think we'd cracked the bigtime because we were booked into all the big clubs in the West-End. The Cromwellian was the big "in" place — and I remember one night Mike Bloomfield dropped in and borrowed our equipment. I mean, even *Stevie Wonder* once sat-in on my Vox Continental. We didn't jam with them, no way . . . we'd progressed from playing Jimmy Witherspoon numbers to things like "Philly Dog", "Knock On Wood", "I've Been Loving You Too Long", "In The Midnight Hour", "Hold On, I'm Comin'," all those sorta things.

Even though I used to really enjoy playing those numbers, what used to annoy me was that I knew that we'd never get anywhere because the attitude within the group was wrong. Most of the guys were happy with their thirty quid a week and didn't have any real ambition. I liked playing things like "Knock On Wood" and we played them reasonably well — but then there were other groups around like The Alan Bown Set and Geno Washington & The Ram Jam Band who were doing much better than we were, simply because they were a little more ambitious. I mean, to this day I can't really understand why The Alan Bown Set never made it. They started around the same time as Bluesology, came from the same area and had a tremendous following. I wouldn't say that I was jealous, but I became envious and, at the same time, infuriated by the fact that Bluesology didn't have that kind of ambition. guys who wanted 30 quid at the end of the week and that was it. They didn't really mind what they did just so long as the money was there. That's been the downfall of so many bands.

I think there are still a lot of bands who just go out on the road for the bread and don't get along with each other. As individuals, we didn't argue too much but I soon began to get extremely tired of playing the Nottingham Rowing Club almost every Sunday.

Did anyone encourage you?

My parents divorced when I was about 14. My dad was a musician. He used to play trumpet with Bob Miller & The Millermen before he joined the Royal Air Force. He frowned upon what I was doing . . . you see, he was a bit snobbish. But my mother always encouraged me and, when she re-married, my step-father also encouraged me.

Did they think that this was something you just had to get out of your system?

There was a period like that when I was still at school. I've still got a letter from my dad — which I might use on the sleeve of the "Captain Fantastic" album — which says "He's got to get all this pop nonsense out of his head, otherwise he's going to turn into a wide-boy, and he should get a sensible job with either BEA or Barclays Bank . . ."

It can still be arranged . . .

Actually, I did go for an interview with BEA . . . but my mother never discouraged me at all. I mean, everytime Taupin and I felt like giving up she'd say right, piss off . . . go on, there's a job going up the greengrocer's and we'd mumble something about that's not what we want to do. Nowadays, people come up to me and ask what the best thing to have when you're starting out in this business and I tell them that just a bit of encouragement from somebody is worth more than having £100 thrust in your palm. Taupin and I were down so many times when people would say someone is going to cover one of our songs and it wouldn't materialise or if it did we'd earn nothing from it. The people who did encourage us in in the first place were Steve Brown and Lionel Conway and Roger Cooke and Roger Greenaway who all worked at Dick James Music.

When we returned from playing in Stockholm we joined up with Long John Baldry who hadn't been doing anything since he'd left The Steam Packet. He saw us one night playing down the Cromwellian and offered us a job backing him. Actually, Baldry wanted to get another Steam Packet thing together with our singer Stuart A. Brown, another guy called Alan Walker and Marsha Hunt. She gave an audition down the old Studio 51 Club and she did an unaccompanied version of "Love Is A Many Splendoured thing". And she was really awful. Baldry said, "Marvellous dear, we'll have you".

What would you say Baldry's motivation was for hiring Marsha Hunt if she was so dreadful at the audition?

Because she looked good and Marsha is a very engaging personality when you first meet her. As I said, she looked good and as far as Baldry was concerned, just as long as she was black and could sing relatively well, that was what he wanted. A black chick, two boy singers and himself.

Were you also singing at this time?

No.

Didn't you have any ambition along those lines?

No. Stuart, who was the singer in the band around that time, was a bit jealous. Sure, I wanted to sing, but for a start, I didn't look like a singer and once you see some of the pictures on the sleeve on the "Captain Fantastic" album you'll realise why.

But neither did Eric Burdon.

Ummmm, that's why I grew very frustrated. Because I wrote a couple of songs — one called "Here's To The Next Time" for Marsha. As it happened, I also used to suggest most of the material to the band. For instance, I wanted Marsha to sing Mitty Collier's "I Had A Talk With My Man" but I sang it better than she did so she wouldn't do it.

But before Baldry took over the show, who was the leader of Bluesology?

I would say Stuart A. Brown.

But you wrote and sang lead vocal on Bluesology's first record "Come Back Baby".

Well, that record was done a long time before the Baldry days. In fact, we were still semi-professional. First I wrote this song and . . . I don't know how the hell I got the audition . . . I went to see Jack Baverstock at Philips Records and played him the demo I'd cut at Jackson's Studio and he liked the song. We went into the studio and cut "Come Back Baby" and the B-side, Jimmy Witherspoon's "Times Getting Tougher Than Tough" in three hours. I can remember sitting in the car and hearing the record being played on Radio Luxembourg and saying, "Hey, that's me singing, folks!" I was really chuffed because that was the very first time that I'd really sung anything.

So how come you sang the song on record if Stuart A. Brown was so jealous of his position as lead singer?

Because he couldn't sing it. He had a very, very, deep voice.

Did this cause any resentment when the record was released?

Not really, because we never played it on stage.

Sounds very much like the situation at the beginning of "Stardust", where there's one cat determined to be lead singer and both the record company and the manager decide the other guy should be.

I didn't really want to be the lead singer in the group, I just wanted to do backing vocals . . . "Ooos" and "Ahhhs". But I wasn't really even allowed to do that. When we started working with Baldry there were four lead singers so there was absolutely no need for anyone else to try and sing.

In those days, had you resigned yourself to being a sideman — or did you harbour an ambition to eventually make it on your own?

I always had ambition. And with every gig I grew more and more despondent. When Baldry got his hit "Let The Heartaches Begin" he quickly got rid of Marsha and Stuart and Alan, because it was just uneconomical. Baldry was the fairest man I've worked with. I love him and the only reason I stayed so long was because he was such a great person to work for.

By the time Baldry got that hit we had a really good group. Neil Hubbard on guitar, Freddy Gandy (later of Pink Fairies fame) on bass, Pete Gavin on drums. Elton Dean played sax and Marc Charig played trumpet. That was the last line-up of Bluesology. Everywhere we played, Baldry would lug a tape recorder and play the backing track for "Let The Heartaches Begin", so we'd go half-way through a set and Baldry would announce his hit and everyone would scream and this orchestra would come booming out.

There's one very funny story about this. Baldry had completely packed out this club at Haverford West and there he was, half-way through the song, and supposed to be knocked out by getting a hit after all these years, and this girl was frantically clutching his microphone and right there and then he started shouting, "You break my microphone and you'll pay me £50!" and then bang! He hit her right on top of the head. That's what I like about Baldry.

● *Continues next page*

ELTONIA: The sheet music, those early publicity shots and that first record. RIGHT: Elton and restricted-growth photographer compare bi-focals.